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# Janet Carsten on the Kinship of Anthropology

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**David Edmonds:** *Claude Lévi-Strauss, who died in 2009, was a profoundly influential French anthropologist – a founder of what is called structural anthropology. He believed that there were patterns in human activity, patterns that crossed borders and cultures. One of the areas that intrigued him was kinship – also a topic of special interest to Janet Carsten of the University of Edinburgh.*

**Nigel Warburton:** The topic we're going to discuss is kinship in anthropology. Can we just begin by saying what kinship is?

**Janet Carsten:** That's actually a harder question than you might think. But kinship for anthropologists includes all the social arrangements to do with what you might think of as family, but then much more broadly in classic anthropology it could include quite a lot to do with religion and political organization because in many of the societies the anthropologists studied there were no states and so therefore the social organization was very largely done through kinship.

**Nigel Warburton:** So kinship for me would be a relationship through blood, as it were?

**Janet Carsten:** Yes, many people would take blood at face value, that's what kinship is about. But we are all too quick to think that we know what we're talking about when we talk about blood. Blood is a symbol and perhaps one of the core symbols of kinship, but of course in not every culture is blood a very elaborated set of ideas. In European cultures blood is very important, and in many others too, but I wouldn't necessarily take that for granted. But also for anthropologists, kinship includes relations through marriage. And that's really, really important and was very fundamental inside of Claude Lévi-Strauss's.

**Nigel Warburton:** When you were talking earlier you were suggesting that kinship could extend far beyond the family to religious groups and other social groups. Why would you call that kinship?

**Janet Carsten:** In many societies studied by anthropologists, their local religion something like an ancestor cult includes relations with festival elders, people who are older than you but also the dead in classic Chinese religion was like that. So those are called ancestor cults usually in anthropology but they come out of a much broader set of kinship relations. Similarly, in the societies that mid-century British social anthropologists studied, political organisation in the absence of states was through kinship. So they were primarily interested in kinship for that religious and political dimension it gave to society, for the way that it

organised society in the absence of states rather than in the close familial domestic relations which we might think of as kinship.

**Nigel Warburton:** Perhaps another way of thinking about this is who's your enemy? Who isn't part of your kinship group?

**Janet Carsten:** Again, you've hit on another knot of kinship studies because there are many societies paradoxically you might think where you marry your enemies. So your *affines*, as anthropologists would put it, your in-laws, are also the people you fight and there are people in New Guinea who are like that. This is much more familiar to people listening in Britain. That tension that we often have with our in-laws, the mother-in-law jokes are a classic example of that is to do with that tension that often exists cross culturally with people who marry into your family. And they're kind of slightly in between position as both in the family and kind of coming from outside it.

**Nigel Warburton:** I always found it slightly mysterious that anthropologists have focused so much on kinship. I think it's interesting, it obviously opens up some understandings of social relations but why has the focus been so strongly on kinship?

**Janet Carsten:** When anthropologists started doing ethnographic field work from the time of Malinowski at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and then through the heyday of classic kinship studies in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century they were really interested in how socialite organisation worked. And to a very large extent they were interested in kinship. That grew out of it 19<sup>th</sup> century more evolutionary idea that our current "civilized" society which was the most modern and advanced kind of society was much less about kinship but that you could map different kinds of kinship in an evolutionary schema. Now anthropology for a very long time has abandoned that so we don't do that anymore. But partly through that evolutionary route and then through much more classic empirical studies of how societies in the absence of states actually work, kinship was always at the heart of what we did as anthropologists. And in another way you could trace the development of the discipline as the history of kinship studies.

**Nigel Warburton:** And throughout that was there an assumption that kinship was a universal, something about the human condition that leads us to organize our societies in particular patterns?

**Janet Carsten:** Well yes and no, because kinship was universal in the sense that kinship is at the core of every society if you like, but the way kinship is organised varies from culture to culture and all those you can group those culture and say this one is uni-lineal another is bilateral and so on and various typologies for doing that. It's also the case that kinship organisation is both universal and variable in the sense that people have different rules

about who I'm not allowed to have sex with. And so it's both part of nature in Lévi-Strauss's times and also part of culture.

**Nigel Warburton:** Might be interesting to have a few examples of the different cultural taboos about the relatives you can and can't have sex with.

**Janet Carsten:** OK, so in some societies that's moved from sex to marriage, in some societies you are supposed to marry what anthropologists would call that cross cousin. So that's a link through an opposite sex relative in the senior generations. If you're a man, your mother's brother's daughter would be a cross cousin. But in other societies you're precisely not supposed to marry someone who is your first cousin, for example. So in other words the taboos governing who is marriageable and who you can have sex with are variable, but it's not by genetic closeness.

**Nigel Warburton:** You mentioned Lévi-Strauss a few times. Perhaps we could say a little bit about his importance in kinship studies.

**Janet Carsten:** When I was an undergraduate in the 1970s, he was the kind of hero of the hour and the fresh air in a way. His first major book was something called, in English translation, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, published in 1949. And it's a huge and very technical book about different systems of marriage. But what's really at the center of it is the idea that rather than dissent and what you would call blood relations being the most important thing about kinship, what Lévi-Strauss argued was that what was the most important thing about kinship was the way that it organised exchange relations between different groups. So for him the incest taboo was important because it encouraged relations of exogamy, in other words out marriage between groups and that was the beginning of culture for Lévi-Strauss. So some of these ideas came from Marcel Mauss's classic work on the gift, which was also all about exchange. So for him, in contrast to British anthropologists working roughly the same time mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it wasn't dissent that was important, it was marriage. And that shifted everything around. But what was problematic was that Lévi-Strauss wasn't really interested in the empirical study of particular societies and how they work. He was interested in much more broad questions of how the human mind works. And in the end, kinship, he decided, was not such a great place to start studying that and he went off to study myth because myth was a kind of realm of pure speculation, unimpeded by all the kind of economic, ecological messy stuff that gets in the way of kinship in terms of trying to see it as a way to get it the way a human mind works.

**Nigel Warburton:** When you were doing your own research in Malaysia how did you go about discovering kinship relations?

**Janet Carsten:** Well, that's a very nice question to answer. So there I was as a young doctoral student and I had learnt my kinship at the London School of Economics. And I never

really understood why I was learning quite technical and very difficult stuff, why it mattered. And then I started doing my field work in Malaysia in a village, a fishing village. And it was immediately apparent to me within the first week why kinship mattered and that was because in very everyday sense it formed the fabric of people's lives that if you lived in this village not that people didn't go off to town and do other things. The men were fishermen and so young men particularly worked on fishing trawlers and got involved in all sorts of long-distance relations. But in the village itself people lived in houses that were quite close together linked as compounds and you could do kinship map of the relations of the compound, and then the village, because villages grew from house to compound to village.

And actually what was really important in what I was very struck by was the importance of sibling relations. So Malay kinship is quite like what you might call British kinship, as anthropologists would classify it as bilateral. So Malay people calculate their kinship both on their mother's side and their father's side, that's not the same as many people round the world and they're equally important. But what's really important is not relations between generations so much -- but structurally you could see Malay kinship as a system of expanded sibling-ship. And this made me also think about British kinship and how anthropologists neglected perhaps to think about the importance of the relation between brothers and sisters. We always take British and European kinship as being much more about dissent relations, between parents and children, but we all know from our experience, those of us who have brothers and sisters, how really important the sibling relationships are actually.

**Nigel Warburton:** And did you elicit information in conversation or by looking at family trees or by talking to people who are outside the family? How do you discover the complexity of the relationships?

**Janet Carsten:** Anthropologists work by participant observation -- and certainly in the British tradition they do -- and that was something founded by Bronislaw Malinowski in the 1920s. My first fieldwork in Malaysia was more than 18 months in a village. Basically I lived with a family, a Malay family during that time and I participated in as many aspects of their life as I could. The senior man in that house was a fisherman, and I didn't go fishing because women didn't go fishing as they don't do in many societies (including British fishermen). So I spent most of my time with women. They did a lot of rice farming and vegetable farming and I did that with them, but also just daily activities in the house. So things like washing clothes and cooking and sitting around chatting. Most people actually love to talk about their families even if it's only to grumble about them. So a lot of what I did was to do with participating in people's daily lives but also asking about their daily lives and the things that made them do things the way they did. Marriage rituals of course and childbirth rituals to some extent were quite a large part of what I did, and Malay marriage rituals are quite elaborate.

**Nigel Warburton:** Has kinship continued to be at the heart of anthropology? I know it was there at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropology but is it something which is now considered central?

**Janet Carsten:** To some extent it's quite a lot more marginal than it was and I think that's a shame. But the reasons are very clear. From the 1970s onwards kinship lost its centrality partly because it became a rather abstract and dry and technical subject and lots of people couldn't kind of understand the point. But also, anthropology moved on and there was an interest in post-colonialism. So in the political evolution of postcolonial societies and to some extent the place of kinship was partly taken by the kind of feminist upsurge outside the academy as well as within it meant that there was a really, a very strong interest in gender relations. Obviously gender and kinship have overlapped in the way anthropologists have studied it, and many have argued that you can't understand gender without understanding kinship. So there was much more overt interest in the study of gender and to some extent kinship seemed rather marginal but I think it's shunted on in all sorts of interesting ways and perhaps more recently become more interesting again because there's been various rather specific inputs interests in reproductive technologies, for example, and what they do to kinship relations. But also the idea that kinship is marginal might itself be a reflection of the stories we tell ourselves about modernity. In other words, that in modern societies, kinship is relegated to the nuclear family to the family day main domestic relation and doesn't really have anything to do with politics or religion. But when anthropologists now look at various ways that institutions function that isn't really clearly the case at all because if you think about American politics, for example, families like the Clintons, the Bushes, the Kennedys, what is all that about, really? Or if you think about how a factory works or a family firm or hospitals where I've been doing my research in Malaysia most recently? Actually kinship and what one might call forms of behaving that we associate with kinship are really important in the workplace, in the way the workplace functions.

**Nigel Warburton:** Your work has been influential in what's come to be called new kinship studies. Could you perhaps say what's new about new kinship studies?

**Janet Carsten:** One might answer that very briefly by saying new kinship studies are actually quite like old kinship studies. But I think what's really important is that kinship is not a kind of abstract and technical subject or it doesn't have to be like that. It's really about people's everyday lives and the way they think about the relations that matter most of them and so for most people if you think about their imaginative lives -- which is quite a big part of what occupies people, what preoccupies them -- is actually their family relations, thinking about that in the most broad sense. So how they're connected to the people that really matter to them. We might include close friendship there. So people spend an enormous amount of time and effort doing things and thinking about their close relationships. And I'm always interested in how that works and also in how it plays out over time between generations

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why commemorating kinship relations matters, what memory and kinship do together. So the kind of everyday stuff of kinship is what interests me. The criticism that one might make of that is that that's very specific and how do you get back to the kind of broad questions that someone like Lévi-Strauss was much more interested in? But I think it's partly through showing some quite nitty-gritty stuff on the ground that you are able to draw that out and think well, why does this matter? And that's a question that anthropologists should always be asking themselves. Why is this important? What does it tell us about society more generally?

**Nigel Warburton:** As an anthropologist, you're usually classified as a social scientist, is that how you see yourself?

**Janet Carsten:** I suppose I'm perfectly happy to be thought of as a social scientist. I'm lodged very happily in a school of social science at Edinburgh. I have to say that I don't consider what I do myself a science, we don't do the kind of controlled experiments that scientists do or hard scientists do. So it's a very different kind of exercise. But I think if we take that on board I'm perfectly happy to be called the social scientist in the same way as a sociologist or some other discipline. We're no more or less scientific than they are, I think, but perhaps sometimes more interesting.